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LIFE OF MARGARET SHIPPEN, WIFE OF BENEDICT
ARNOLD.

BY LEWIS BURD WALKER.

(Continued from page 190.)

A QUESTION OF MOTIVES.

If we clearly set forth all the circumstances which might tend to influence the conduct of Margaret Arnold, it will aid the reader to determine what course of action she probably pursued.

The only motive assigned for her conduct in the allegation that she committed treason is in Burr's charge that she was an "extravagant woman. There is no doubt, therefore, that for the purpose of acquiring the means of gratifying an inordinate vanity, she contributed greatly to the utter ruin of her husband."

As to the charge of extravagance, we can say that Arnold was extravagant before his marriage, and had even then opened up a correspondence with the British. In all the circumstances of her after-life Margaret Arnold was very economical in the expenditure of money, and though perhaps she may be blamed for *not* restraining Arnold's ex-

penses, yet we must remember that it was in the first year of her married life, when he was thirty-nine and she was nineteen.

While Edward Shippen, in his letter of December 21, 1778, did complain of the increase of his expenses for that year, we think that, as his family consisted of himself and wife, four grown-up daughters, and one grown-up son, he had no valid reason to complain that the living expenses of his family, including the wedding of his eldest daughter, reached nineteen hundred dollars in specie in the year 1778. It was the cutting off of his income from his profession that pinched him.

We have not been able to find any further evidence of the alleged extravagance of Margaret Arnold; and, although Aaron Burr may have supposed that the woman who, at the hour of her deepest, greatest distress, could so utterly and contemptuously scorn his advances must have possessed an "inordinate vanity," yet we require better proof than his assertion alone.

We think that affection for her kindred would furnish to Margaret Arnold a more powerful motive for loyalty to America than would the desire for wealth (to gratify an "inordinate vanity") for treachery. During all her life she exhibited remarkable attachment to and affection for her relatives, and she certainly would not do anything to injure them.

She was accustomed to meet cultivated society and men of affairs, and she well understood that British success would have rendered every man who took part on the American side guilty of treason.

Margaret Arnold knew this, and she knew that the penalty was death, for the fate of Roberts and Carlisle was familiar to every Philadelphian; and in addition, her father had no doubt told her how the heads of traitors were exposed on Temple Bar. The executions that followed the Scotch Rebellion of 1745, the Lord Gordon Riots of 1780, and the Irish Rebellion of 1798 show how bloody would have been

the British triumph. That triumph would have rendered eleven of her near relatives and connections liable to execution for treason, whom we will name as follows: Edward Shippen, of Lancaster, her grandfather; Dr. William Shippen the elder, her grandfather's brother; Dr. William Shippen the younger, her father's first cousin; Colonel James Burd, her uncle; Edward Burd, her brother-in-law; Jasper Yeates, married to her first cousin, Sarah Burd; Curtis Grubb, married to her first cousin, Mary Shippen Burd; James Willing, her father's first cousin; Tench Tilghman, her own first cousin; Tench Francis, her uncle; and Richard Willing, her father's first cousin.

If we are to judge from the motives which influenced Margaret Arnold, we feel certain that she was guiltless of treason.

ANSWER TO CHARGES AGAINST MRS. ARNOLD.

We think we have clearly shown that the accusations against Mrs. Arnold have not been sustained by any satisfactory proof. In a legal trial such a state of facts would render it unnecessary for her to make any defence. But we now propose to give such evidence as will clearly establish her innocence, and for convenience we divide it into classes as follows:

1. The opinion of the people at the time of the treason.
2. Mrs. Arnold's own statements, conduct, and character.
3. Opinions and conduct of her relations and friends.
4. Opinions of generals, etc., who had opportunities of personal observation.
5. Opinions of historians who have examined the subject.
6. Arnold's statements, actions, and conduct.

First. The people did not believe her guilty. In Sparks's "Life of Arnold" (Boston, 1835), page 299, it is stated,—

"In her travels through the country, she was every where treated with a respect and forbearance hardly to have been expected in the exasperated state of public feeling which then prevailed; a proof that, although unfortunate in her alliance with a traitor, she was not considered guilty of participating in his crimes."

Second. Mrs. Arnold's statements, conduct, and character are inconsistent with the idea of her guilt.

a. We have the proof that she publicly asserted and claimed she was innocent. The account of Hamilton is conclusive on this subject; he says, "she is very apprehensive the resentment of her country will fall upon her (who is only unfortunate) for the guilt of her husband," etc.

b. Washington gave her the choice whether to join her husband in New York or return to her father in Philadelphia. She chose to return to her father. If guilty, this was the most perilous course she could adopt. She had seen how violent was the hatred of the mob, for her husband had previously been the object of its fury. She well knew the deadly character of its rage, for "Fort Wilson" was only a square from her father's house, and her sister's husband, "Neddy" Burd, had been in the house during the attack, and had told her how Captain Campbell had been killed and how narrow had been the escape of all the rest from death. And she was but too well aware of the nature of the penalty of treason, for it had not been two years since the execution of Roberts and Carlisle had horrified the people of Philadelphia.

Let any reader who is disposed to think that the sex of Mrs. Arnold would have obtained immunity for her, if convicted of treason, ponder well the stories of Marie Antoinette and Madame Roland. Their fate in those days of Jacobinism is a sufficient answer to any doubts.

If guilty, prudence demanded that the papers at West Point should be destroyed, yet this was not done.

c. The character of Mrs. Arnold herself, as we know it and have attempted to portray it, is the strongest evidence to be found that she was innocent of treachery. She came of a race noted for fidelity, honesty, and truth, and she was proud of her kindred, who had suffered for their opinions both in England and in America. The manner in which she discharged the duties of life affords us an example well worthy of imitation. In that character, whose fascinating

graces almost concealed the good old-fashioned virtues which she also possessed, there was no foul blot of treachery. "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit." It was no traitress to America who wrote from England,—

"I was sincerely sorry to hear of the death of General Washington. I admired his public, and revered his private Character. I fear that America will sustain an irreparable loss in him, as he appeared to possess the happy talent of uniting all Parties."

In another letter she said,—

"I was very sorry to hear of General Washington's Death; nobody in America could revere his character more than I did."

When Lord Lauderdale, after having fought a duel for his animadversions upon Arnold in Parliament, "expressed great concern" at finding that Mrs. Arnold "had been made unhappy, and begged leave to wait upon her, to make an apology," surely it was not a traitress for whom he was thus concerned.

Third. The conduct and opinions of her relatives are inconsistent with the idea of her guilt. What more perilous place of residence could be found for her than Philadelphia? What could be more foolish than for her relatives to try every means in their power to induce the Council to permit her to remain where she would constantly be exposed to danger? Unless she had been innocent, her uncle, Colonel James Burd, would not have written to his son, "Neddy" Burd, both soldiers in the Continental army: "The affair of Mrs. Arnold gives us all great uneasiness, we think it a little hard that the Council would not grant the Indulgence she Required we don't know what to think of her going to New York but theres no help."

Among her relatives there is none so proud but feels honored to claim kinship with her. Among all the different branches of that diversified relationship there is one uniform tradition to this day, that she was beautiful in person, engaging in manners, devoted in her affection, and guiltless of participation in her husband's treason.

Fourth. The opinions of officers who, from their presence at West Point or other circumstances, would have knowledge of the facts are in favor of her innocence.

Washington's opinion is shown by his action in two different particulars. First, he gave her the option to go to her father in Philadelphia or to her husband in New York. Second, upon finding that Arnold had actually escaped to the British, he informed her of the fact to relieve her anxiety. We most confidently affirm that Washington would have done neither of these things unless he had felt convinced of Mrs. Arnold's innocence.

Rochambeau says (see 2 Am. Register, 163), "General Washington found him [Arnold] gone, and Mrs. Arnold not knowing what had become of her husband."

Hamilton says, "We have every reason to believe that she was entirely unacquainted with the plan, and that the first knowledge of it was when Arnold went to tell her he must banish himself from his country and from her for ever." We call the reader's particular attention to the use of the word "we" in this sentence, showing that this was the general opinion. It is the only time he uses "we" in this narrative, while he has used "I" eight times.

d. We quote the following extract from a letter from Lafayette to Chevalier Luzerne, dated at West Point on September 25, 1780; the whole letter is given in Vol. II. page 164 of Tower's "Lafayette in the American Revolution":

"The unhappy Mrs. Arnold did not know a word of this conspiracy; her husband told her before going away that he was flying never to come back, and he left her lying unconscious. When she came to herself, she fell into frightful convulsions, and completely lost her reason. We did everything we could to quiet her; but she looked upon us as the murderers of her husband, and it was impossible to restore her to her senses. The horror with which her husband's conduct has inspired her, and a thousand other feelings, make her the most unhappy of women.

"P. S. She has recovered her reason this morning, and as, you know, I am upon very good terms with her, she sent for me to go up to her chamber. General Washington and every one else here sympathize

warmly with this estimable woman, whose face and whose youthfulness make her so interesting. She is going to Philadelphia; and I implore you, when you return, to use your influence in her favor. It would be exceedingly painful to General Washington if she were not treated with the greatest kindness. You know the sentiments of the people and of the Assembly of Pennsylvania. Your influence and your opinion, emphatically expressed, may prevent her from being visited with a vengeance which she does not deserve. General Washington will protect her also. As for myself, you know that I have always been fond of her, and at this moment she interests me intensely. We are certain she knew nothing of the plot."

In the Shippen Papers, page lix, is the following statement by Mrs. James Gibson:

"I propose now to relate an anecdote on this subject, which is fresh to my own knowledge and recollection.

"Major Franks, of the Revolutionary army, was a well known acquaintance of my parents. He was respected and welcomed wherever he went, for his social good humor and manly candor. In one of his visits to Philadelphia, where his near relations resided, he was often at my father's; and one day, when dining with other gentlemen at our house, and my father and the others had returned to the parlor, my mother detained Major Franks to converse with him respecting Mrs. Arnold, whom she had recently heard very unjustly spoken of. He entered upon the subject with alacrity. Mama said to him, 'Tell me Major Franks, what is your opinion and belief concerning her knowledge of her husband's plans.' He quickly replied, 'Madam she knew nothing of them—nothing! She was as ignorant of them as a babe.' His manner was solemn and earnest, and I began to think it might be proper for me to withdraw, but he said, 'Don't let Betsy go—I have nothing to say that she may not hear.' Of course, I gladly resumed my seat at the table, and he went on:—'Madam, I am glad you have mentioned this subject. I have much to say. I am much distressed by it. Within a few days I have heard, for the first time, things said of her that are contrary to truth—false—utterly false! You know I was one of Gen. Arnold's aids. He paid me the compliment to assign me the particular duty of protecting Mrs. Arnold; of attending to her safety, her general welfare, and her health. I was, in the General's family, laughingly called *the nurse*! Her health was then delicate; and while General Arnold was in command at West Point, he frequently sent her to different, sometimes distant parts of the country, on that side of the river. He always sent a guard with her, besides her female attendant, and gave me very particular charge over her welfare. He spoke of her

suffering in the bustle of the camp, and wished her to be relieved from it during the summer. I obeyed, nothing doubting, but considering him a pattern for a husband, although other and far different motives for sending her away on these excursions afterwards came to light. But, madam, she knew nothing of his projects. In truth, she was subject to occasional paroxysms of physical indisposition, attended by nervous debility, during which she would give utterance to anything and everything on her mind. This was a fact well known amongst us of the General's family; so much so as to cause us to be scrupulous of what we told her or said within her hearing. General Arnold was guarded and impenetrable towards all around him, and I should believe her to have been ignorant of his plans, even without my knowledge of this peculiar feature in her constitution; but *with it*, such a strong corroborative proof, I am most solemnly and firmly convinced that General Arnold never confided his detestable scheme to her. *He could not have ventured to do it.* He was, moreover, too well aware of her *warm patriotic feelings.* *You know, madam, how completely she was American at that important period.* Madam, I can aver solemnly, she was totally ignorant of his schemes.' ”

In Volume IV. page 61, PENNSYLVANIA MAGAZINE, in speaking of Arnold, Henry Lee says, “He has deceived his wife, & has betrayed his friend, Major André.”

John Jay writes to Robert Morris on December 18, 1780: “Arnold's Plot was as unexpected as its discovery was fortunate. His wife is much to be pitied—it is painful to see so charming a woman so sacrificed.” (New York Historical Society Collection, 1878, page 453.)

Fifth. The historians who have examined the subject are of the opinion that Mrs. Arnold was not an accomplice in her husband's treachery.

a. Joseph Reed was probably Arnold's bitterest enemy, and his views are contained in the life written by his grandson, W. B. Reed. Yet even he has come to a conclusion favorable to Mrs. Arnold. On page 273 of Volume II. he says,—

“Colonel Hamilton, in a well-known letter written at the time, has given it as his conviction, founded on observation of Mrs. Arnold's excessive distress on her husband's desertion, that she was innocent. . . . Hamilton's judgment on a matter where sympathy with afflicted beauty

had influence, is not always to be relied on, but in this instance it was probably correct."

In a note at the foot of the page he adds,—

"In Davis's *Life of Aaron Burr*, vol. i. p. 219, a different theory is suggested, but on very inadequate evidence."

b. Isaac Arnold, on page 321 of the "*Life of Benedict Arnold*," says,—

"No one who reads her letters contained in this volume will believe her capable of acting the double part with which she has been charged. On the contrary, if Arnold had disclosed his plans to her, she would have been much more likely, prompted alike by her love and her clear perception of right, to have tried to save him from the commission of a fearful crime and a terrible blunder."

c. In Bryant's "*History of the United States*," Volume IV. page 17, edition of 1892, it is said,—

"The assertion, so generally made, that Arnold took advantage of this correspondence to put himself in communication with André can hardly be true, for Mrs. Arnold was ignorant till the last moment of the treacherous relation her husband had established with the enemy, and André and Sir Henry Clinton were for a long time unable to ascertain the real name of the person to whom they were indebted for much valuable information."

d. In Sargent's "*Life of André*," page 220, it is said,—

"Though at the outset the English had no clue to their correspondent's identity, the character and value of his information soon led them to suspect it; and it is supposed by some that this letter to Mrs. Arnold was written with the view of making clear to her husband the character of its author, and to invite a return of confidence. This may possibly have been the case; but all my investigations show that the lady had not any suspicion of the dealings between the parties, or was ever intrusted by either side with the least knowledge of what was going on. Equally false, in my judgment, is the charge that she tempted her husband to treason. Her purity and elevation of character have not less weight in the contradiction of this aspersion than the testimony of all chiefly concerned in the discovery and punishment of the crime. This correspondence must have engrossed much of André's time. His letters are said to have been 'numerous and significant,' though there

is no reason to believe that, so far as Mrs. Arnold was concerned, its limit ever exceeded the one just published."

e. Sparks says ("Life and Treason of Benedict Arnold," page 248, edition of 1835),—

"It may be here added, that Mrs. Arnold had been only the last ten days at West Point, during her husband's command at the post, and that nothing was afterwards brought to light from which it could be inferred that she had any knowledge of his traitorous designs."

f. Washington Irving, who was personally acquainted with Burr, says in his "Life of Washington," Volume IV. page 151, edition of 1863,—

"In recent years it has been maintained that Mrs. Arnold was actually cognizant and participant of her husband's crime; but after carefully examining all the proofs adduced, we remain of opinion that she was innocent."

This opinion is of great weight, because Irving had exceptional opportunities of knowing the value of Burr's testimony. Washington Irving had been educated as a lawyer, and had been retained as one of Burr's counsel in Burr's trial for treason. ("Life and Letters of Washington Irving," Volume I. page 190.)

g. In the second volume of "The American Revolution," page 213, Professor John Fiske says,—

"but is in the highest degree probable that down to the final catastrophe Mrs. Arnold knew nothing whatever of what was going on."

In a note he says,—

"*I think there can be no doubt that Burr lied.*"

h. Henry C. Van Schaack, author of "The Life of Peter Van Schaack," "The Illinois Country," etc., was devoted to historical and antiquarian pursuits, and became greatly interested in the case of Mrs. Arnold. After carefully investigating the accusation against her, and the evidence pro and con, he embodied the result of his labors in a lecture, which he delivered before the Historical Societies of New York and Chicago. In speaking of Burr we quoted from

this lecture, which is entitled "A Vindication of Mrs. Gen'l Benedict Arnold against the charge of implication in her husband's treason." In conclusion, Mr. Van Schaack says,—

"We can justly concur in pronouncing this lady untainted by treason. And I am happy to add, that we have reason to know, that in her subsequent life Mrs. Arnold proved herself a faithful, a blessed, a noble mother to her children."

i. In Sabine's "American Loyalists," edition of 1874, under the name Arnold, Margaret, on pages 176 and 177, it is said,—

"The allegation of the third Vice President of the United States concerns common girlhood, common wifehood, and universal motherhood; hence the time bestowed upon it. In my judgment, the subject of this notice should be acquitted. The *probabilities* are all in her favor, and there is no *evidence* against her. Indeed, more; dates and facts prove her entire innocence. . . . In the eighty-three years which have elapsed since the alleged imprudent boasting of Mrs. Arnold at Mrs. Prevost's, hundreds of volumes of biographies and correspondence of the Revolutionary era have been published; but, as far as my knowledge extends, not one of them contains a syllable to corroborate Burr's story, or in any way to implicate the subject of this notice. Nor is this all. When I mingled with Loyalist families in the British Colonies, Arnold himself, the beauty, character, and fate of his wife, were among the favorite topics of conversation. Gentlemen of the lineage of the Colonel, who went up the Hudson in the Vulture with André, and other well informed persons, never once suggested that by tradition, even, Mrs. Arnold was involved in the treason."

j. Although Bancroft does not mention Mrs. Arnold at all, yet he does make some statements which are conclusive of her innocence. On page 378, Volume X., edition of 1874, in speaking of Arnold, he says,—

"Towards the end of February, 1779, he let it be known to the British commander-in-chief that he was desirous of exchanging the American service for that of Great Britain. . . . In the course of the winter 1778-79 he was taken into the pay of Clinton, to whom he gave on every occasion most material intelligence."

If the foregoing statements be correct, Arnold was a traitor *before* his marriage to Margaret Shippen.

In a note to page 395 Bancroft makes a remark which is peculiarly appropriate to Burr's charges against Mrs. Arnold. It is:

"Hamilton had the best opportunities to be well informed; . . . The reminiscences of men who wrote in later days are so mixed up with errors of memory and fable that they offer no sure foothold."

k. In Lossing's "Washington and the American Revolution," Volume II. page 692, the following statement is found:

"The tenderest care was bestowed upon her, and she was soon escorted in safety to her friends in Philadelphia. Arnold's family, and others, have sought to make her the author of the traitor's defection, or, at least, an accomplice in his guilt; but I have never yet seen a particle of evidence to prove that she had any knowledge of the traitorous designs of her husband."

In this connection we call the reader's attention to the fact that no mention of Mrs. Arnold as being implicated in her husband's treason is made in any of the following histories: Hildreth's "United States," Ramsay's "United States," Knight's "England," Hughes's "England," Stanhope's "England," Botta's "America," Mercy Warren's "History of the Revolution," Headley's "Washington and his Generals." Nor have we been able to find a single reputable historian who, after examining the evidence in the case on both sides, has come to the conclusion that Margaret Arnold was a traitress.

Sixth. The conduct of Arnold himself is inconsistent with the idea that his wife was an accomplice in his treason.

Of all men in this world, Arnold alone knew the entire truth. In his letter of September 25, 1780, to Washington from on board the "Vulture," he said,—

"I have no favor to ask for myself. I have too often experienced the ingratitude of my country to attempt it; but from the known humanity of your Excellency, I am induced to ask your protection for Mrs. Arnold from every insult and injury that a mistaken vengeance of my country may expose her to. It ought to fall only on me; she is as good and as innocent as an angel, and is incapable of doing wrong. I beg

she may be permitted to return to her friends in Philadelphia, or to come to me, as she may choose."

Surely this assertion of her innocence is as credible as Burr's to the contrary. But we do not ask the reader to depend upon this assertion, but to consider the latter part of the quotation. If guilty, Philadelphia was the most dangerous place for her, and the suggestion of her return would have been most egregious folly.

When Arnold was about to fight the duel with Lord Lauderdale, he forbore to discuss it with his wife. If she had been an accomplice in his treason, why should he not discuss the duel, which indirectly grew out of the treason?

But Arnold's conduct on one occasion is, in our opinion, a decisive proof of his wife's innocence, even if all the other testimony in her favor had been obliterated. It was not in the first tumult occasioned by the discovery of his treason, and while he was still hopeful of the ultimate success of the British arms, though full of alarm for his wife and child, but after he had drunk his cup of bitterness to the bottom, and had learned to loathe his treason as only an unsuccessful traitor can; when he had repented, and had put on his old American uniform with the exclamation, "God forgive me for ever putting on any other" (Arnold's "Life of Arnold," 395); when her face, once the most beautiful in England, had been wasted by

"Care and sorrow and child-birth pain ;"

when he was contemplating the time when he should walk no more this fair green earth, and all that he could ask was for some true man or woman to carry out his will and to treat his children fairly. Who would trust a traitress to make a fair division? Yet the will of Benedict Arnold contains the following item :

"I give Devise and Bequeath to my Beloved Wife her Heirs, Executors and Administrators all my Estate both *Real* and *Personal* that I may die possessed of, after paying my Debts and Legacies as before and here

in after mentioned, for her own use and benefit during her continuing a Widow and to be disposed of among *All* my Children at her Death, as she may think proper, not doubting her doing them all equal justice. But should she marry again, Then it is in that case, my Will and Pleasure that all my Property shall be divided among my Children upon her second Marriage, and in that case, I hereby Give Devise and Bequeath all my Estate both Real and Personal that I may have, or die possessed of to my Children to be divided among them in such equal proportions as my beloved wife shall think Just and Proper, consideration being had to those Sums of Money that they have already received and that have been expended upon them for their Education &c. And Consideration being also had to their respective Ages and Situations in Life, not doubting that she will do them *all equal Justice* as she knows *it is* and has always been my intention (as my affection has been equally divided among them) to make an equal provision for them all."

These are the words of Arnold at the time when he would speak the truth, if ever. He reposed this trust in his wife because he knew she was faithful. Under all the circumstances, we think that Arnold's testimony is more convincing than that of any other witness.

In concluding this biography we desire to state that we have given all the facts as far as we have been able to ascertain them from the original documents, whose very language we have endeavored to follow, and, having done this, we only ask in behalf of Margaret Arnold for JUSTICE!

(To be continued.)